



Thou shalt not Steal.





Thou Shalt not Steal.

A

S E R M O N

BY

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“Ὁ κλέπτων μηκέτι κλεπτέτω.”—*St. Paul.*

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By ELIAS NASON,

In the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts.

Natick, December 13, 1852.

REVEREND ELIAS NASON:

Dear Sir: — The undersigned respectfully request for publication, a copy of the interesting and valuable sermon which you delivered in the First Congregational Church in this place, on the morning of Sabbath, December 12th.

Respectfully your
obd't servants,

GEORGE WALCOTT,
GEORGE D. WISE,
JOHN W. BACON,
LEONARD WINCH,
EBEN HANCHETT,
NATHANAEL SMITH,
NAHUM T. GREENWOOD,
CHESTER ADAMS,
B. F. HAM,
ABNER RICE.

Natick, December 18, 1852.

GENTLEMEN:

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 13th instant; and although the sermon to which it refers was not intended for publication, I herewith submit a copy of it to your disposal, with the hope and prayer that God will commend whatever of truth it may contain, to the hearts and consciences of the citizens of this community.

With kind regards, both for your spiritual and temporal welfare, I remain
your very obd't servant,

ELIAS NASON.

To Messrs. GEORGE WALCOTT, AND OTHERS.

S E R M O N .

THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.—Exodus, 20 : 15.

It is our lot, my friends, to live in a money-making, money-loving age. Our people bend the knee to a metallic god and barter all they have or hope to have for glittering gold. Of this they dream by night, and for it, they toil by day. It fires the ambition of youth, monopolizes the energies of manhood and petrifies the heart of age.

“How shall I make a fortune?” “How shall I increase my stock?” “How shall I obtain more money?” “How shall I GET HOLD OF IT?” is the great, the all-absorbing question of the times ; — and were a denizen of some distant sphere to come among us, listen to our common conversation and observe our incessant “scrambling” after gain, he might well suppose our meat and drink, our raiment and our reputation, our bliss in this world, as in that which is to come, all to centre and consist in that one brief word — GOLD.

This inordinate thirst for gold ;* this earthy, selfish, money-making spirit, which often gets the entire mastery of a man and sweeps all moral principle by the board, pervades this whole community, and more than any thing beside, resists the progress of God’s Kingdom.

* “Auri sacra fames.”—Æn. I. 3: 57.

I have thought, therefore, my friends, it to be high time for me to call your attention back to an old LANDMARK set up for your guidance on the shore of time ; — to republish to your ears that solemn mandate from Mt. Sinai — THOU SHALT NOT STEAL — which the hot impetus of this age for making money renders doubly meet for us to keep unceasingly in view.

“Thou shalt not *steal* ? But does our pastor suppose,” methinks I hear some of you exclaim, “does our pastor suppose that there are *thieves* in this assembly ? that any of us ever steal ? ever actually take, ever do *so* mean a thing as take that which does not belong to us ? Why, that is a criminal, an indictable offence ! He surely cannot allude to any one of *us*. Such precepts might do very well for New South Wales, but not for Natick.” I shall not, my friends, accuse you ; but will only ask permission, as it were, to write a few words on the ground ; and then if your own consciences do not accuse you, I will frankly own that you are better far than he who speaks to you.

Were all stealing done by dark lanterns under cover of the night, or on the highway in the lonely wood ; were all thieves armed with pistols or with “sling-shot ;” were God’s law as short-sighted, his equity as unequal as the laws and equity of man,—then it might perhaps be useless to present this subject : but, my friends, there are several ways of stealing in the world, and some of it is done by men who never carry weapons ; and, the greater is the shame for it, in broad day-light. Some things, too, are highly esteemed among men which are abomination — “abomination in the sight of God.” *

To steal, as the original word נָסַף implies, is to take deceitfully or by stealth, that which belongs to some one

* Luke 16: 15.

else; and there are many ways of doing it. Some of them are in the public eye entirely disreputable; some of them indifferently bad, and some of them are quite genteel and fashionable; but all of them are equally heinous, equally detestable in the eye of God.

Among the different kinds of stealing, there is one which may be called

PROFESSIONAL STEALING.

This, however, is by no means the most common kind; and I have this to say on its behalf, that it unfolds its real flag and goes by its right name; for whether a person pick your pocket or your trunk; whether he put his hand into your money-drawer, or steal your horse and carriage in the night; whether he enter your garden and bear off your fruit, or your front door and take away your cloak; whether he purloin your newspaper or your silver plate, he still is branded with the name of THIEF — is tried and punished as the criminal code therefor establishes and directs.

And to say nothing here of more momentous consequences which the professional thief must meet, it seems to me that if such a man would look, as I have lately done, into the gloomy precincts of the over-crowded prison of this Commonwealth, and observe the rigid discipline, the ceaseless labor, — sad and silent as the grave, — the cold and narrow cell, the hard pillow and the scanty fare; — if, I say, such a man would but consider what it is to be immured in such a place, — to be cut off from human sympathy, cheerless, homeless, and alone; a felon's mark upon his brow, a felon's guilt upon his soul; methinks this thought alone should be to him a triple wall of brass to curb and check his fell propensity to steal.

But professional thieves are fond of darkness and obscurity ; they spend this holy day in dismal corners, lounging in the tavern bar-room, or concealed in haunts of infamy, with their cards and dice and wine ; they often skulk into the woods and give these sacred hours to gambling, or to laying plans for plundering in the night ; they seldom find their way into the house of God ; and, therefore, I will call your attention to another kind of stealing, much more frequent, much more popular than this, yet equally as mean, and equally at variance with the law of God. I shall call it

FASHIONABLE STEALING.

It grows up, like the other, out of this abominable thirst for gold to which I have referred ; it appears in broadcloth, and in good society ; it comes to church, and even lays its hands upon the sacred vessels of the Lord.

Its names are numberless ; and some of them are very specious, and have come to be almost as common as the “ circulating medium ” of the country ; — such as “ speculating,” “ saving one’s friend,” “ ruining one’s self,” “ selling off at cost,” “ giving goods away,” “ accommodating,” “ sacrificing,” and a hundred more adroitly used to cover up deception, or to render it veniable in the public eye.

Under such false colors, this fashionable kind of stealing now contaminates the whole current of trade ; * and things have come to such a pass, that many think they cannot live by doing business honestly : many, indeed, go

* The Association of New Haven West, says a writer in the Puritan Recorder, lately licensed a student in theology, who, in the course of his examination, while relating his religious experience and entrance on the Christian life, said that after he came to the determination not to do what he believed to be morally wrong, he was threatened with the loss of his place in the store, simply because he would not, as the

on so far as to suppose, that because the human law cannot grasp hold of this iniquity, the divine law will not ; go on so far even as to make a boast of their own abominations.

But, it must be evident to you, my friends, that taking property deceitfully in any way or any place,—taking property DECEITFULLY, though it be done under a fair speech and fine exterior, — though it be done in company with the “great ones” of the world, — though it be put under the flattering name of “shrewdness,” “tact,” or “speculation,” or whatever else you please to call it, CLASHES AS DIRECTLY WITH THE LAW OF GOD, as taking it by false keys and dark lanterns in the dead of night.

That man who takes advantage of my ignorance to overreach me in a bargain, or of my poverty to wrench from me usurious interest ; that man who sells adulterated goods to me, or gives me stinted measure in my wood or coal, or milk or groceries ; that man who sells me “stuff to stèal away my brains ;” that man who “shaves” my note, or unjustly alters his “account” against me or against my estate when I am gone ; that man who refuses to pay me when he can, or makes me take an “order” when I bargained for the “cash ;” that man who fails in trade and pays me ten per cent. of what I worked so hard to earn for him, and lives in princely style for the remainder of his life ; that man who “boards” with me and never means

other clerks did, and as he had done hitherto, stand behind the counter and lie to customers from day to day. For refusing to do this, he was degraded from his comparative standing, and lost his place in consequence. When inquired of, whether this practice was peculiar to that store, he said he believed it was very common in that city, absolutely to lie in the sale of goods, so often as it became necessary to get gain. If this be so, what an astounding fact ! What depravation among our business young men does it portend ! No wonder so many clerks in large cities have from time to time proved unfaithful to their employers, and become lost, or more than lost to their friends and the community.

to pay for it ; who borrows money of me which he knows he never can return ; who pretends to more than he is worth and thus induces me to indorse his paper, or to less than he is worth, and thus avoids the payment of his taxes ; that man who deceives me by his false advertisements, informing me that he is selling “ cheap ” when he is selling “ dear ; ” that man who imposes on me damaged goods for sound ones ; “ wooden shoes ” for leather ones ; or cheats me any way, whether by fair pretensions or by “ low-browed knavery ; ” whether in broadcloth or in homespun ; whether I have sense to find it out or not ; — that man breaks the law, THOU SHALT NOT STEAL, as certainly as the thief who robs a bank beneath the cover of the darkness ; — that man is really as amenable to God’s eternal justice, as the ruffian that plunders “ while the watchmen sleep.”

He takes deceitfully what does not belong to him, and that is breaking, — whether done by himself or agents, by wink or nod, above the counter or beneath it, by pen-craft or by tongue-craft, by false label or false story, by counterfeit coin or counterfeit coffee, in State Street or in Natick ; in mercantile, agricultural, mechanical or professional life, — that is breaking the eighth commandment of Almighty God !

There is, my friends, a sad mistake among us on this point. We are deceived by names, misled by outward show, disposed continually to forget that law, that dreadful law which underlies the human law and binds us close and tight where this can never reach.

The doctor forgets it when he prolongs disease that he may lengthen out his bill against his victim ; the lawyer forgets it when he advises men to go to law in cases which might be adjusted peacefully at home ; the minister for-

gets it when he preaches anything “but Christ, and him crucified ;” the layman forgets it when he refuses to pay his proportion to support the gospel ; the school-teacher forgets it when he neglects that poor and bashful scholar in the corner ; the farmer forgets this statute of eternal rectitude when he removes an ancient landmark, or permits his cattle to destroy his neighbor’s garden ; the mechanic forgets it when he does his work unfaithfully ; the milkman, when he sells his “watered milk ;” the painter, when he adulterates his paints ; the traveller, when he neglects to advertise the purse he finds, or rides upon the railroad farther than he pays for ; the publisher forgets it when he over-states the circulation of his book or paper ; the quack forgets it when he advertises his destructive medicines ; the school-boy, when he mars the public building ; and the girl, who spends her time in idleness, while her poor old mother wears her life away in household servitude. And thus I might go on till evening shade to enumerate the “ways and means” by which men break the eighth commandment of the decalogue. But it is enough to say to you that this statute demands honesty in the dark as well as in the day-time ; honesty in pence as well as pounds ; honesty in refined society as well as in unrefined ; honesty in the very intents and purposes of your souls, as well as in the open transactions of your lives ; and that every conceivable method or imposition by which the property of another is deceitfully or wrongfully obtained is in the Hebrew acceptation of the word, in the meaning God himself has put upon it, — downright STEALING.

I said, my friends, when I began, that I should not condemn you ; but if your consciences are doing it, I ask you to remember that “God is greater than our heart, and

knoweth all things ; ” * and if any of you have taken what is not your own in this fashionable way to which I have referred, I ask you Zaccheus-like to give it back again ; I ask you to abandon totally and forever the whole system of dishonesty in your dealings ; I ask you to live uprightly, even to the very thoughts and purposes of your heart ; — to put away that miserable principle which is now hurrying many a deluded soul to ruin, that an honest man, as trade now is, cannot obtain a livelihood ; I ask you to do PRECISELY RIGHT, and leave to God the consequence ; and if you cannot “ live ” by rectitude, then DIE, and enter heaven at least as honest men !

I ask you to carry the same sense of God’s presence with you into business, as you experience at the sacramental board ; I ask you to suffer wrong, rather than to do wrong ; I ask you, in the name and by the blessed life of Jesus, NOT TO STEAL !

I ask you not to steal, because THERE IS NO WIT OR WISDOM IN IT.

Many thieves are detected in the very act and made to repent of it for life. Here is one of a thousand instances which are occurring daily in this iniquitous age of gold. I cut it from the “ Traveller ” of last evening.

“ HONESTY THE BEST POLICY. — A man from Foxborough undertook to defraud the Railroad Company by buying a ticket to Canton and going to Foxborough, seven miles beyond. The conductor detected him in the fraud, brought him before Justice Gaston, who very properly punished him with a fine of fifteen dollars.”

He would save one quarter of a dollar by his cunning, and he loses sixty of them by his folly ; and his reputation also.

And so that man who takes what he ought not to take, is thereby setting a trap to catch, not a "sunbeam," but a "living coal," to burn into his bosom. He sets a trap to catch himself; and it will most surely catch him, however cunningly he may set it.

"His mischief," says the Psalmist, "shall return upon his own head; and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate." *

The man who takes another's property deceitfully, is a witling and a fool; so far, I mean, as that transaction goes. Were it in his power to "trammel up the consequence," to control results in front of him, it then perhaps might answer: but God has so linked coming consequence with antecedent action, that every single farthing fraudulently taken, is a living seed that yet must spring into a thorny brier to sting the bosom of the guilty one. Every ill-gotten dollar is an egg to breed a serpent that must strike its deadly fangs into the heart of him that takes it.

What a lesson history gives us on this point; what wrecks made by collision with this law of God — "Thou shalt not steal," are thickly strewn along the shore of time, from the miserable Achan with his stolen wedge of gold; the greedy Judas with his "thirty marks" and dreadful end; Rome with her iniquitous extortion; Napoleon with his ill-gotten kingdoms; South Carolina with her unholy man-stealing,—down to the wretched inmates of our State penitentiary; down to the unhappy lives of dishonest men in this community; down to the children even who are to inherit their unhallowed gains. Let us heed, my friends, the warning voice of history, and keep the mark which separates "the meum and the tuum," the MINE from THINE distinctly and forever in our eye.

* Ps. 7: 16,

Again, I ask you not to steal, BECAUSE THERE IS NO NEED OF IT.

The all-bountiful and ever-blessed God is keeping this whole universe at work to give us food and raiment, and such other comforts as we stand in need of. Put your confidence in him, and he will never see you want.

He that clothes the lily in imperial beauty ; he that shelters yonder forest-bird and protects it from "the peltings of the pitiless storm ;" he that watches over the winged butterfly and feeds it with the dewy nectar, will most certainly provide for you.

"If ceaseless thus the fowls of heaven he feeds,
If o'er the fields such lucid robes he spreads,
Will he not care for you, ye faithless, say?
Is he unwise, or are ye less than they?"

Thompson.

And should your affairs sometimes seem almost desperate, you have no need to steal, for that same glorious God who sent his birds to bear a piece of meat to an Elijah in the wilderness ; who sent a fish to bear a piece of money to a Peter at Capernaum, still lives and watches over you, and can at any moment send some messenger of mercy to supply your wants.

God has already done great things for us, and will do, if we trust him, greater still. We live in a land that literally overflows with milk and honey ; we have natural resources almost illimitable ; we have education and ten thousand useful arts to help us, and any honest man can find enough to do for his support if he will seek for it ; — can gather riches just as fast as it is good for him to possess them.

"Ask and ye shall receive," is not an empty declaration such as men are wont to make ; it is an eternal pledge

by One able to redeem it, that they who obey the Lord and go to him in faith for help, shall want for no good thing.

This sentence will stand also as an eternal rebuke to those who would receive without asking ; and in opposition to the law of God.

Once more I ask you not to steal, BECAUSE GOD COMMANDS YOU NOT TO DO IT.

God is not, my friends, like feeble and forgetful man, who says a thing and leaves it there ; but in the accomplishment of his designs he follows up his orders with untiring vigilance. His eye, which slumbereth not nor sleepeth, ever rests upon you ; it sees you when you break and when you keep his law ; it is fixed upon you and your money when you count it over ; it saw you when you got it ; saw the place it came from and the measures you put forth to obtain it ; it sees precisely what are your assets and liabilities ; how much you own by fair means ; how much you have stolen ; it goes on farther still ; it looks down into the secret chambers of your souls, examines the intents and purposes thereof, and sees what you are doing THERE.

By night and by day God follows you ; he sees you make your bargains, counts over every farthing you receive or would receive, and knows what you intend to do with it. He brings the unbending line of this great law — THOU SHALT NOT STEAL — down into immediate contact with your naked hearts ; he binds it there as with bands of adamant ; he holds it there until the judgment ; and on that dreadful day he measures you by its unerring standard.

Then your false names, your stolen capital, your pretended honesty, your apt expedients and your artful advocates ; then your cunning bargains and your “selling off

at cost," your interest with the banks and brokers, and your ill-gotten gains ; then your public sentiment will not avail you, for God will look at naked thoughts and deeds, and not at words or outward covering ; and will then bring every secret and dishonest thing to light, and will give decision thereupon which will oftentimes astonishingly reverse the decisions of these lower courts, and of the public also ; but from which there can be no appeal.

When I think, my friends, of that impartial bar towards which our footsteps tend so rapidly, and of the high demands which God's inflexible equity imposes on us ; when I think how often we have transgressed, in thought at least, that rule of it which we are now considering, and that there is, in addition to all this, such a thing as **ROBBING GOD HIMSELF**, of which I fear we are not altogether guiltless ; when I think of our position in this mighty universe, encircled as we are by the omnipotence and the unchanging laws of the eternal God of truth and equity, and of the awful scenes which we so soon must witness, I confess that I am lost in the dread solemnity of the thought, in the profound consciousness of my existence under such responsibility ; — for guilt, **GUILT, GUILT**, is on the brow and in the heart of man, and all that I or you can do, is but to raise our eye to that blessed Jesus who came down and dwelt and died among us, to fulfil the law, and wash that guilt away.

Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift ; there is one Omnipotent to save us from our guilt ; for " he hath laid help upon one that is mighty ;" and therefore all that I can say to you is to lift up your souls to him to be baptized into his holiness, and " **GO AND SIN NO MORE.**"

